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A New Emphasis on Operations Against South Korea?

By Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.

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38 NORTH SPECIAL REPORT: A NEW EMPHASIS ON OPERATIONS AGAINST SOUTH KOREA?

*A Guide to North Korea's Intelligence Reorganization and the General Reconnaissance Bureau**

During the past twenty years, North Korea's intelligence and internal security community's organization has undergone numerous changes, most designed to secure the power and position of Kim Chong-il¹ and to deal with increasing levels of unrest and corruption within the civilian population and the military.

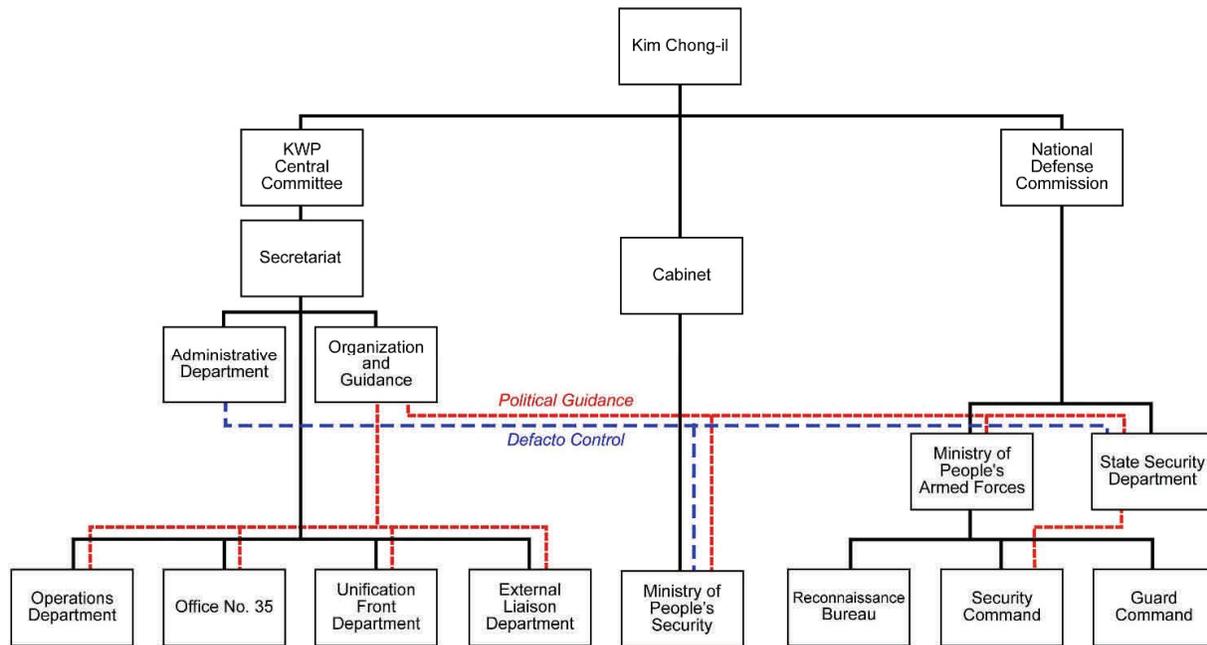
Recent changes during 2009-2010—the most dramatic reorganization in years—seem to have been implemented to unify all the intelligence and internal security services directly under the National Defense Commission (NDC) and to secure the position of Kim Chong-il's son, Kim Chong-un, as his successor.

Prior to 2009, the organization of the community originated with Kim Chong-

il and proceeded down through three channels—the National Defense Commission, Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and the Cabinet. Subordinate to the National Defense Commission were the Ministry of People's Armed Forces and State Security Department. The Reconnaissance Bureau, Security Command and Guard Command were subordinate to the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. The Korean Workers' Party Secretariat was in charge of the Operations Department, Bureau No. 35, the Unification Front Department and the External Liaison Department while the Cabinet exercised nominal control over the Ministry of People's Security (figure 1).

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Figure 1. Intelligence and Internal Security Organization, Pre-2009



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Following the reorganization in 2009 (figure 3), the NDC was expanded from eight to twelve members with five now controlling the entire community including the Ministry of People's Security that was transferred from the Cabinet. Additionally, press reports indicate that changes occurred within those organizations tasked with foreign intelligence operations, including those handling the Republic of Korea (ROK). Specifically, the Ministry of People's Armed Forces' Reconnaissance Bureau was merged into the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB).² While this organization remains institutionally subordinate to the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, it apparently reports directly to NDC Vice Chairman General O Kuk-ryol, a trusted follower of Kim Chong-il who has played a pivotal role in anti-ROK intelligence operations since at least 1989 when he was appointed director of the Operations Department.³ This responsibility is reminiscent of the former position known as the KWP's Secretary in Charge of Anti-ROK Operations (SICARO) that existed from the 1960s through the late 1970s.⁴

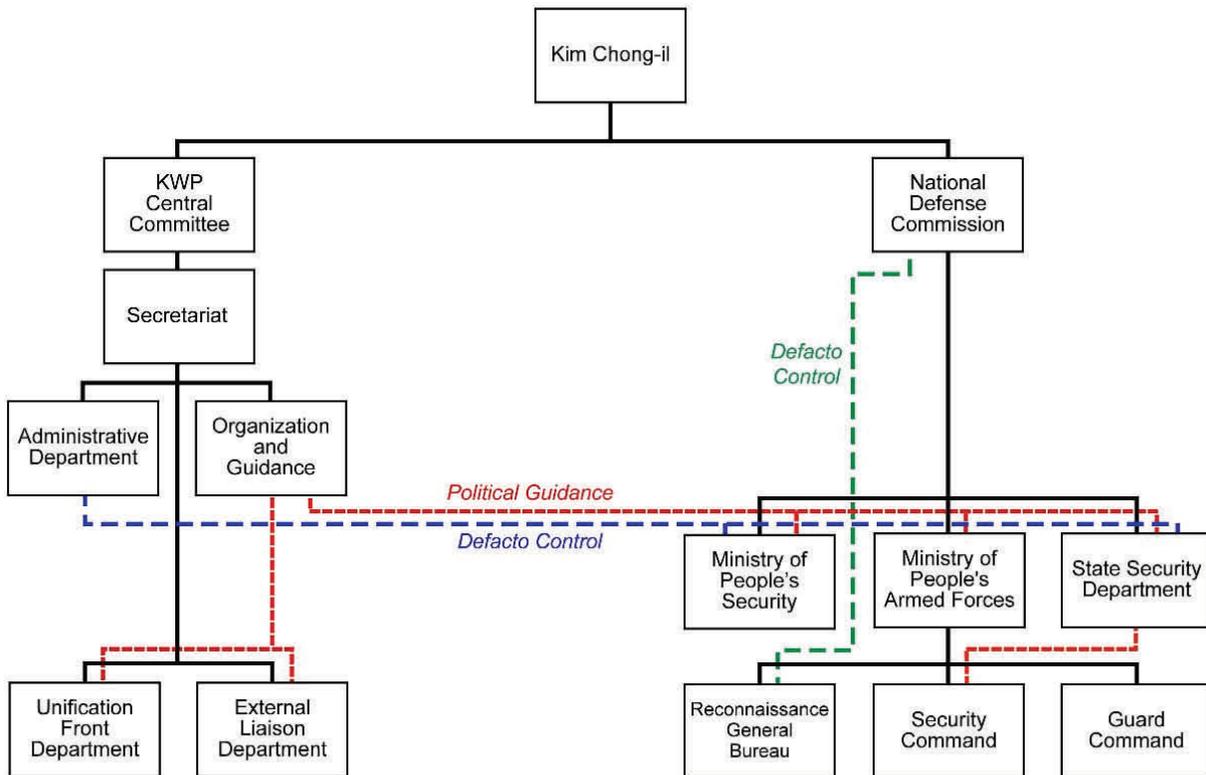
The consolidation of responsibilities under General O Kuk-ryol suggests the North may be adopting an active policy against South Korea that may include more provocative operations in the future. The attempted assassination of former KWP Secretary Hwang Jang-yop by two Reconnaissance General Bureau



Figure 2: NDC Vice Chairman General O Kuk-ryol.

operatives (Kim Yong-ho and Dong Myong-gwan) and the sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette Cheonan by what is believed to be a Reconnaissance General Bureau YEONO-class midget submarine could be the first visible indications of such a change.⁵

Figure 3. Intelligence and Internal Security Organization, 2009-2010



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Noteworthy is that at the 3rd Plenum of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly held on June 7, 2010, Jang Song-taek,⁶ the director of the KWP's Administration Department, was appointed to Vice Chairman of the NDC. In his position as director of the Administration Department, both the State Security Department and Ministry of People's Security reported directly to him. Jang's appointment means that all foreign intelligence (including anti-ROK operations) and internal security organizations are under the control of two of the four Vice Chairmen of the NDC—General O Kuk-ryol and Jang Song-taek respectively—thereby consolidating all these powerful agencies one level immediately below Kim Chong-il. This move helps delineate more clearly the areas of responsibilities for each agency and reduces operating inefficiencies within the various agencies. Significantly, it also solidifies the powerbase for the upcoming succession of Kim Chong-il by his son Kim Jong-un.

THE RECONNAISSANCE GENERAL BUREAU (RGB)⁷

While information concerning the 2009-2010 organizational changes within the intelligence community is limited, it appears that the Reconnaissance General Bureau (figure 5) was established by combining the KWP's Operations Bureau and Office No. 35 with the Ministry of People's Armed Forces' Reconnaissance Bureau. The Unification Front Department and External Liaison Department, also known to mount operations in the South, were reduced to bureau-level organizations and remained subordinate to the KWP's Secretariat.⁸

At this early stage it is unlikely that there have been any significant organizational changes within the various agencies now subordinated to the RGB. Such changes will probably be implemented as the organization develops and redundancies are eliminated. For example, both the former Operations Department and the Reconnaissance Bureau maintain large maritime components designed to infiltrate intelligence agents into South Korea and Japan. It would seem likely that these components would be combined in some fashion in the future. As a result, coordination and competition between the various agencies, frequently problem areas in the past, will probably improve, making these agencies more efficient.

The RGB is headquartered in P'yongyang and organized into a headquarters and six bureaus: First—Operations; Second—Reconnaissance; Third—Foreign Intelligence; Fifth—Inter-Korean Dialogue; Sixth—Technical; and Seventh—Rear Services.⁹ The director of RGB is Lieutenant General Kim Yong-chol, who was previously in charge of the NDC Policy Department and headed the DPRK's military delegation to the inter-Korean military talks held during 2006-2007.

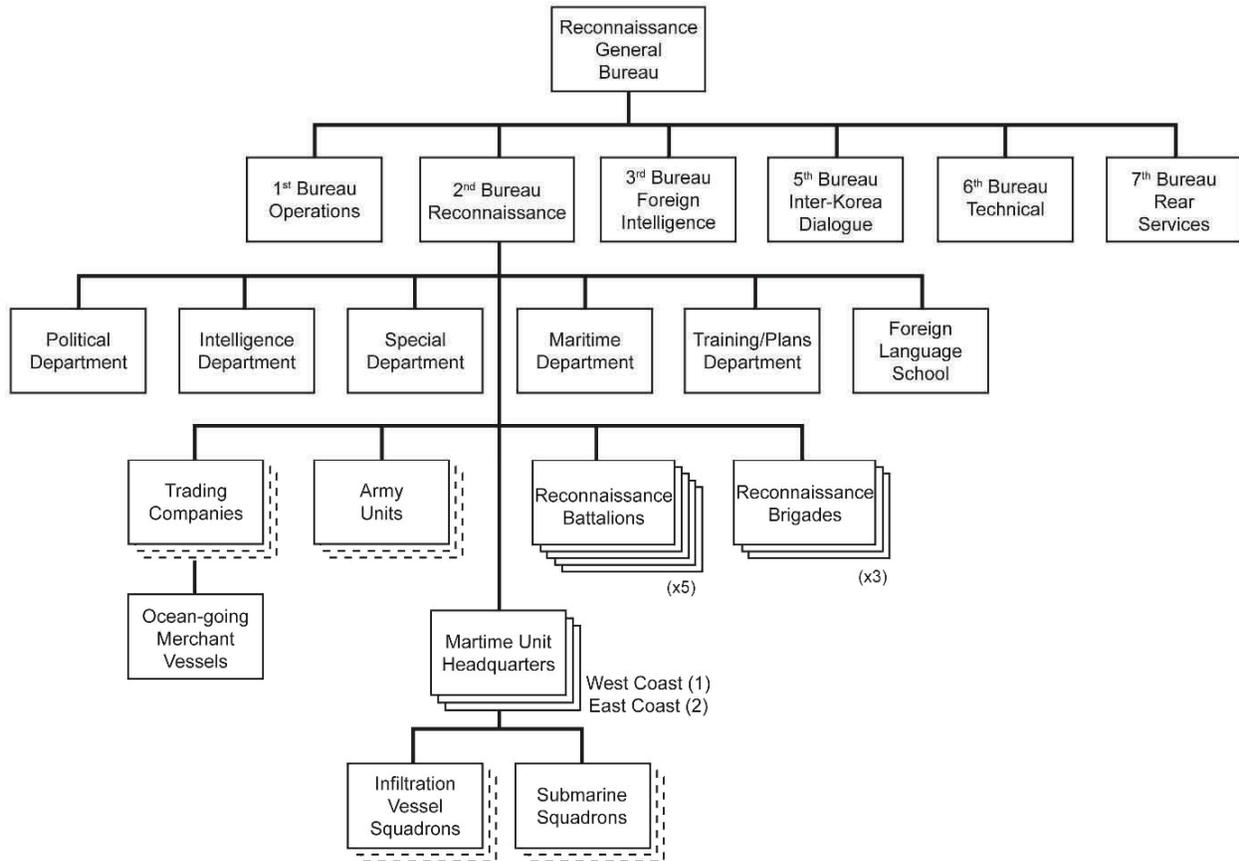


Figure 4. RGB Director Kim Yong-chol.

First Bureau: The First Bureau was established from the former KWP Operations Department.¹⁰ The details concerning the changes within the Operations Department that accompanied its 2009 integration into the Reconnaissance General Bureau are unclear, although it appears that the department was simply transferred with some minor personnel adjustments. The First Bureau is responsible for basic and advanced training of intelligence agents, escort training and escort operations (which facilitate covert infiltration of agents throughout the world). It is organized into a Headquarters, Basic Training, Advanced Training, two Seaborne Escort Training Centers, four Seaborne Escort Units (a.k.a. Maritime Liaison

Offices) and two DMZ Escort Units. Defector statements suggest that the Operations Department has approximately 6-7,000 personnel.

Figure 5. Reconnaissance General Bureau



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Basic and advanced training generally occur at a system of safe houses located throughout North Korea, although most are in the P'yongyang area. The specific organization responsible for this training was previously known as the Central Committee Political School, or 695th Army Unit, and now goes under the name of the Kim Chong-il Political and Military Academy (or Central Committee Political and Military Academy).

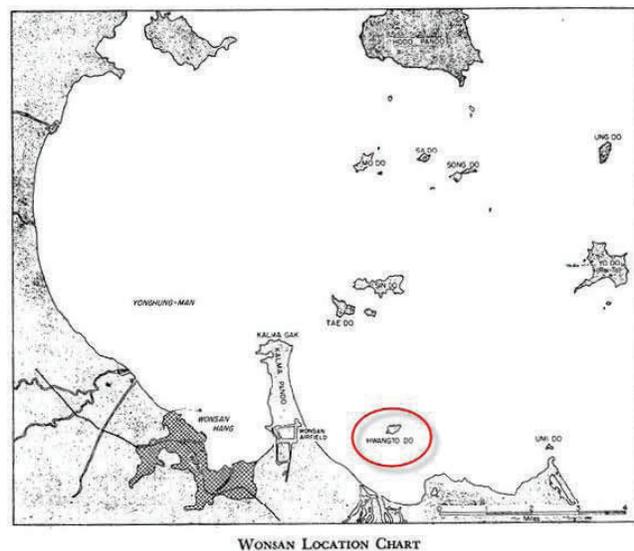
Safe houses are isolated so students are only familiar with the training, operations and personnel of their own team to prevent compromise if captured. Instructors and others working within the Operations Department generally have little or no contact with members of other departments. Courses can last from six months to two years and cover a wide range of subjects. Agents, or agent teams, live alone except for

a housekeeper and are generally permitted to leave the house only once a week or month. They may be allowed to visit their families once a year. The Kim Chong-il Political and Military Academy graduates 60–80 agents a year.

Two groups conduct operations in South Korea. The DMZ Escort Units, headquartered in Kaesong and P'yongyang (or possibly Sariwon), are responsible for guiding and protecting intelligence operatives trained by other agencies as they covertly penetrate the demilitarized zone into South Korea. The Seaborne Escort Units, headquartered in Haeju, Namp'o, Wonsan and Ch'ongjin (figure 6), have specific geographic areas of responsibility: Ch'ongjin, operations against Japan; Wonsan, operations along the peninsula's east coast down to Pusan; Namp'o, operations along the southern coast including Cheju-do and Pusan; and Haeju, operations along the west coast. These units are responsible for the seaborne transportation and insertion of intelligence operatives into the South and Japan.

The unit based in Wonsan operates a number of specialized infiltration vessels, semi-submersible infiltration landing craft and YUGO-class midget submarines.¹¹ In the past this unit maintained a training base on the island of Hwangt'o-do in Yonghung-man (the bay outside the east coast port city of Wonsan).¹² Infiltration teams receive advanced and mission specific training at this base.¹³ According to defectors the Ch'ongjin unit has been assigned approximately twelve infiltration vessels (a.k.a. "mother" ships). These infiltration vessels are specially designed high-speed craft disguised to look like ordinary fishing boats. Their mission is to transport infiltration teams to points off the coasts of South Korea or Japan.

Figures 6 & 7. Cities of Seaborne Escort Units (left); Hwangt'o-do in Yonghung Bay (right).



Upon arrival, the infiltration teams use specialized smaller craft to conduct covert landings of intelligence operatives.

The First Bureau has also been involved in kidnapping operations throughout the world intended to secure persons to serve as language and cultural instructors for North Korean operatives and to allow previously trained agents to assume the victim's identity. These latter operations have generally occurred in Asia, particularly Japan. To conduct these missions, the Operations Department employs a wide variety of specialized swimmer delivery vehicles, semi-submersible infiltration landing craft, infiltration vessels and midget and coastal-submarines.¹⁴ Some of these maritime assets will probably be integrated with those of the Reconnaissance Bureau in the future.

Finally, the department has mounted a wide range of illegal operations throughout the world including: counterfeiting and money laundering, manufacturing and selling of narcotics and the smuggling and sales of luxury goods and weapons. In doing so, it gained access to large quantities of foreign currency. These responsibilities and operations will probably continue, now under the control of the RGB.

Second Bureau: The Second Bureau (the former Reconnaissance Bureau)¹⁵ is organized into: Headquarters, Political Department, Intelligence Department, Special Department, Training/Plans Department, Maritime Department (a.k.a. Special Seaborne Operations Unit), three Sniper Brigades and five Reconnaissance Battalions. Additionally, the Reconnaissance Bureau operates a number of trading companies and industries both as “covers” and to generate foreign currency. (The Reconnaissance Bureau's former Technical/Radio Department was apparently used to form the Sixth Bureau.)

The Maritime Department, believed to be located in Wonsan, is responsible for infiltrating agents and special operations personnel by sea using specialized submarines, infiltration vessels, semi-submersible landing craft, and swimmer delivery vehicles. The Department seems to have three operational bases, each consisting of a small number of units or combat squadrons (battle groups).¹⁶ It operates YUGO-class and YEONO-class midget submarines, SANG-O-class coastal submarines and a variety of infiltration vessels, semi-submersible infiltration landing craft and support ships. These are apparently organized into separate squadrons by type.¹⁷ It is presently unclear how the changing inventory of midget and coastal submarines has effected the organization of the Maritime Department's subordinate units.¹⁸

The Reconnaissance Bureau's three Sniper Brigades are North Korea's most elite special operations forces. They have the capability, training and equipment to execute a wide range of reconnaissance and

Figures 8 & 9. A YUGO-class 110 ton submarine stranded off the east coast while extracting DPRK HUMINT agents (left). A SANG-O-class coastal submarine that was captured in 1996 off Kangnung (right).



special operations missions in South Korea, the region and globally. Each sniper brigade appears to consist of 3,300-4,600 personnel depending on the number of subordinate sniper battalions. Each brigade is organized into: a headquarters and rear services element, a signal company, and seven-ten sniper battalions. Individual battalions consist of approximately 450 personnel and are organized into: a headquarters and rear services element, a signal platoon, and five companies of three platoons each.

The Sniper Brigades are complemented by five reconnaissance battalions, four employed primarily for DMZ infiltration and deployed with each of the North Korean army corps deployed along the zone while the fifth is responsible for overseas operations.¹⁹ These five battalions consist of approximately 500 personnel each and are organized into a headquarters and five companies (one of which is a training company). Each company consists of approximately 90 men and is organized into a headquarters and four platoons. Platoons consist of four five-member teams, highly trained combat troops, each with an assigned specialty such as team leader, assistant team leader, communications, cryptographic and linguistics.

The Reconnaissance Bureau has been responsible for numerous anti-ROK operations over the years including: the January 1968 attempt to assassinate ROK President Park Chung-hui at the presidential Blue House residence in Seoul; the October 1983 Rangoon bombing—an attempt to assassinate ROK President Chun Tu-hwan in which 21 people were killed including four Cabinet ministers; the failed 1996 attempt to infiltrate the South at Kangnung during which a SANG-O-class coastal submarine was captured; the 2010 attempt to assassinate former KWP Secretary Hwang Jang-yop in Seoul; and most re-

cently it is believed that a Reconnaissance Bureau YEONO-class midget submarine sank the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan.

Personnel from the Reconnaissance Bureau have also played a crucial role in the North's foreign military assistance program. This includes the provision of military training to foreign governments, revolutionary organizations and terrorist groups; foreign internal security and defense operations; and arms transfers. Sniper brigades and other Reconnaissance Bureau personnel are believed to comprise the majority of all North Korean military advisory teams throughout the world. Since the late 1960s, when KPA anti-ROK special operations peaked, the North has made a number of attempts to de-stabilize unfriendly governments and support friendly governments and organizations (e.g., the regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe).²⁰ Since the late 1980s however, there has been a steady decline in material support for international terrorist and revolutionary groups although these efforts have continued, albeit at a much reduced level. One reason is the North's declining political and economic strength. In turn, special purpose forces involved in such activities shrunk.

Third Bureau: The Third Bureau is based on the former KWP Office No. 35. Responsible for the collection of foreign intelligence and the conduct of overseas operations, it is organized into a headquarters and six primary sections: Chosen Soren; Japan; Americas; Europe; Africa and Asia; and South Korea.²¹ Up until the 1990s the Third Bureau is known to have had field offices in major cities including Moscow, Beijing, Berlin, Tokyo, Guangzhou, Macao, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

The last known director of Office No. 35 was Ho Myong-uk who was appointed to his position in 1997. Ho is a senior civilian intelligence professional who has been deeply involved in operations against South Korea and Japan since the 1980s. He reportedly had some involvement in the 1984 kidnappings of South Korean film personalities Sin Sang-ok and Choe Un-hui, the 1987 bombing of Korean Airlines flight No. 858, and other overseas operations.

Fifth Bureau: The Fifth Bureau is believed to be responsible for gathering intelligence on inter-Korean affairs from, for example, defectors, conferences, and family reunions. It is probably involved in anti-ROK psychological warfare, propaganda and agitation operations. Little other information is available concerning this bureau although it would appear to have some of the same missions as the KWP's Unification Front Department.

Sixth Bureau: Established from the former Technical/Radio Department, the Sixth Bureau works with

the General Staff Department's Electronic Warfare Bureau and is, believed to exercise overall responsibility for signals intelligence (SIGINT), electronic warfare (EW) and information warfare operations within the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. The number and organization of the SIGINT assets within the Ministry of People's Armed Forces is unclear. Ground based assets are believed to consist of a small number of independent collection sites located throughout the North in areas of high interest (e.g., along the DMZ as well as the Russian and Chinese borders); the electronic warfare/SIGINT battalions within Korean People's Army corps; and the EW/SIGINT battalions that exist within some KPA divisions. In addition to these assets the Sixth Bureau exercises some degree of control over the Air Force's SIGINT collection aircraft and Navy's intelligence gathering vessels. The Bureau also coordinates operations with the Ministry of People's Armed Forces Communications Bureau and its subordinate units. The relationship and level of coordination and cooperation between the Sixth Bureau and the State Security Department's Communications Interception Bureau (a.k.a. Signals Interception Bureau) is unknown. The Communications Interception Bureau may be the senior service.

Seventh Bureau: The Seventh Bureau, possibly known as the Rear Services or General Bureau, reportedly provides logistical and administrative support for the other bureaus. As such, it exercises overall responsibility for planning, budget compilation and procurement and distribution of materials for the RGB and its subordinate entities.

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¹ This paper utilizes the McCune Reischauer system of Romanization.

² Lieutenant General Kim Yong-chol is also director of the National Defense Commission's Policy Department.

³ O Kuk-ryol is considered an expert on intelligence operations having been the director of the KWP's operation Department since 1989 and having overseen numerous anti-ROK operations as well as the development of a number of classes of infiltration vessels, semi-submersible infiltration landing craft and mini-submarines. With his promotion to NDC Vice Chairman, it is unclear if he will continue as director of the Operations Department, now under the new Reconnaissance General Bureau.

⁴ The position exercised direct control of the intelligence agencies subordinate to the Korean Worker's Party and is known to have operated from the 1960s-through late 1970s—and possibly beyond.

⁵ A midget submarine is typically described as displacing less than 150-tons and have a crew of only 2-10. Because of their small size they are difficult to detect and most often used for covert intelligence and special operations. These recent operations are strongly reminiscent of the aggressive insurgency operations undertaken by the Reconnaissance Bureau during the mid-late 1960s.

⁶ Jang Song-taek is married to Kim Chong-il's sister Kim Kyong-hui and has been the director of the KWP's Administration Department since 2007.

⁷ Interview data acquired by Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.; "Reconnaissance General Bureau is Heart of N.K. Terrorism," *Korea Herald*, May 26, 2010; Yu Yong-won and An Yong-hyon. "'Dangerous Man' O Kuk Ryol," *Chosun Ilbo*, June 8, 2009; and Ch'oe Son-yong and Chang Yong-hun. "North Korea Integrates Maneuvering Organs Targeting the South and Overseas Into Reconnaissance General Bureau," *Yonhap*, May 10, 2009.

⁸ It appears that many of the responsibilities of the Unification Front Department have been absorbed by the Policy Department of the National Defense Commission. The Unification Front Department is responsible for open and covert issues relating to "South-North Dialogue" and the reunification of the "Fatherland"—including all anti-ROK psychological warfare and propaganda operations. The External Liaison Department is responsible for the establishment and expansion of the Korean Workers' Party within the ROK (e.g., underground KWP cells) and the collection of political intelligence within the ROK and Japan.

"Who's Who in N. Korea's Powerful Defense Commission?" *Chosun Ilbo*, June 1, 2010.

⁹ Some sources identify the bureaus as being numbered 1 thru 7. There is no Fourth Bureau as a result of Korean cultural traditions.

¹⁰ Interview data acquired by Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.; "Article on DPRK Spy Ships," *Sekai no Kansen*, July 1999, pp. 106-107; and "DPRK Spy Organizations Targeting Japan Tokyo," pp. 68-73.

¹¹ The unit based in Wonsan has been identified in the past as the 313th Army Unit (a.k.a. 313th Liaison Unit, 313th Liaison Station, 313th Liaison Office, or 313th Liaison Department).

¹² Alternate spellings for Hwangt'o-do are Hwangt'o-som and Hwangt'o-to.

¹³ Previously captured infiltrators from the 313th Army Unit have reported undergoing up to 45 days of mission specific training before conducting an infiltration into the ROK.

¹⁴ Coastal submarines fall between midget and ocean-going submarines in crew size and displacement. Typically they operate in coastal, or littoral, waters being employed for special operations, reconnaissance and coastal defense.

¹⁵ Interview data acquired by Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.; and "DPRK Spy Organizations Targeting Japan Tokyo," pp. 68-73.

¹⁶ The three maritime bases are located one on the West coast in the Namp'o-Pip'a-got area and two on the East coast in the Wonsan and Nagwon-up areas. These are presently separate and distinct from those of the First Bureau/Operations Department's Sea Escort Units.

¹⁷ "Agency Releases Videotaped Testimony by DPRK Infiltrator," *Yonhap*, 29 October 1996.

¹⁸ "Captured Infiltrator Cited on DPRK Submarine Operations," *Korea Herald*, October 3, 1996, p. 3; and "DPRK Has 4 Submarine Bases for 'Infiltrations' of South," *Digital Chosun Ilbo*, September 30, 1996, as cited in FBIS-EAS-96-191.

¹⁹ Interview data acquired by Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.; and "DPRK Spy Organizations Targeting Japan Tokyo," *Gunji Kenkyu*, June 1999, pp. 68-73.

²⁰ Zimbabwe provides an example of the DPRK's support for friendly Third World nations. DPRK involvement in Zimbabwe dates to the mid-1960s when it cooperated with both the former Soviet Union and China in supporting alternately Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in their war against the Rhodesian Government. Since the guerrilla victory in 1980, the DPRK has provided advisors, training, equipment and weapons to the Zimbabwean Government.

²¹ These sections are sometimes referred to as divisions.